

## network

HUMANITIES

## Featured in This Issue

1

New film, radio, media projects explore California topics and issues

Oral history project explores change in a formerly thriving gay neighborhood

3

Photography and writing project opens teens' eyes to the world around them

5

Filmmaker Abby Ginzberg talks about latest film project, a documentary on Cruz Reynoso

# Seventeen film, radio and new media projects to provide fresh views of California

The son of farmworkers who became a California Supreme Court Justice, the first African-American mayor of Los Angeles, the overlooked heroes of the United Farmworkers movement, San Francisco's postwar movie theater culture, and the popular instrument, the accordion, are among the topics of the film, radio and new media projects selected by the Council in its latest round of California Documentary Project funding. The Council awarded a total of \$375,000 to 17 projects in three categories: film and radio production, research and development, and new media. This marks the first time that the Council opened the grant program to new media projects.

Through a partnership with the Skirball Foundation, the Council is now the leading supporter of documentary films about California subjects and issues. "Our films are telling important and compelling stories about the state, its history and its people that might not

otherwise be told," said Council Executive Director Ralph Lewin. "They are also serving as catalysts for discussions about the critical issues we face. This newest crop of projects will further enlighten us about our evolving history."

Council-supported documentaries have won many honors over the years and have received 12 Academy Award nominations. Recent Council-supported films include "Hollywood Chinese," Arthur Dong's award-winning chronicle of Chinese Americans in Hollywood films; "Chicano Rock," the lively and inspiring story of how generations of young people in America's largest Mexican-American community created a unique musical voice; and "Going on 13," about four years in the lives of four Bay Area girls. Information about other Council-supported films can be found at [http://www.calhum.org/programs/doc\\_intro.htm](http://www.calhum.org/programs/doc_intro.htm).

The following projects received grant awards:

## FILM AND RADIO PRODUCTION GRANTS

### Cruz Reynoso:

#### A Man for All Seasons

Producer: Abby Ginzberg  
\$80,000

"Cruz Reynoso: A Man for All Seasons" is a multilayered documentary film about former California Supreme Court Justice Cruz Reynoso, the son of farmworkers who has devoted his life to ending racial discrimination, fighting for immigrant rights and promoting equal opportunity. The film documents Reynoso's early life in rural Southern California, his leadership of California Rural Legal Assistance and his election to the California Supreme Court. Reynoso's story reveals aspects of 20th-century California history as seen through the lens of a unique individual who has been at the crossroads of change and controversy for more than seven decades.

continued on page 4

## POLK

### Oral history project chronicles a changing San Francisco neighborhood

When Coy Ellison ran away from an abusive home in the late 1970s, he found in San Francisco's Polk Street — then a working-class gay neighborhood — a sense of community and family he never grew up with. Today, the community spirit that made the area so special for Ellison and hundreds of others is rapidly disappearing and Polk Street is becoming a place where the working-class gay male presence is barely visible.

What happened to change Polk Street — or Polk Gulch, as it is also called? And what do the changes mean for the identity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement and San Francisco's reputation as a welcoming place for LGBT people and a safe haven for the socially marginalized? With the help of a \$10,000 California Story Fund grant, 30-year-old Joey Plaster, a freelance journalist and oral historian, under the sponsorship of the San Francisco Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender

continued on page 6

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HUMANITIES

By Ralph Lewin, Executive Director



I RECENTLY HAD the good fortune to visit the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Standing at the top of the marble steps on a cold winter day, I thought of Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, and I remembered that Marian Anderson, one of the most celebrated singers of the 20th century, gave a performance there after being barred from singing at Constitution Hall.

Anderson opened her 1939 concert with a rendition of "My Country 'Tis of Thee," which King evoked in his "Dream" speech almost 25 years later, and which some 46 years after that Aretha Franklin sang (albeit across the Mall on the steps of the Capitol) to celebrate the inauguration of our first African-American president. The song with its refrain of "let freedom ring" connects us to the experiences of previous generations who experienced hatred and discrimination because of the color of their skin and to the people today who are working — in the words of President Barack Obama — to perfect our union in these challenging times.

As we face that uncertain future, I think that the humanities have a vital role to play in guiding us through hard times, and are perhaps more important than ever before. Through the humanities, we learn how to think creatively and critically, to ask questions, to examine the past and to imagine a better future. Today, more than ever, we need to tap into the power of the humanities to guide us in understanding our world and to help us create a clearer picture of what we want our future to be.

In the pages of this newsletter you will read about 17 outstanding film, radio and new media documentary projects the Council is supporting — from a film about former California Supreme Court Justice Cruz Reynoso to a project that will help document the history of hate crimes in California. Once completed, these projects will provide new insight into who we are as Californians and who we might become.

These pages also contain an article about an innovative writing and photography project providing young people with another avenue for learning — the visual world around them. And you'll find an article about how stories are instilling hope in a changing San Francisco neighborhood. These projects are adding to our knowledge of the world and, like "My Country 'Tis of Thee," they are helping participants and audiences connect with the past and with the broader human experience. I believe this work is important to us as a society and to every one of us as individuals.

## Shelleda Joins Council Board

The Council is pleased to welcome Margaret Shelleda to its Board of Directors. Shelleda is executive director of the 120,000-member California Federation of Teachers, and she has organized unions almost all of her adult life. Prior to joining the CFT staff, she worked as a national representative of the American Federation of Teachers and served as deputy executive director of local 790 of the Service Employees International Union.

Shelleda became interested in union organizing when she was a student at the University of California, Davis, where she held a job as a library assistant to support herself through her university years. Her political science studies, combined with student anti-Vietnam War activities, farmworker support and involvement in women's equity issues, led her to join efforts to unionize UC non-academic employees and State of California clerical workers. She abandoned her original plans to become a social studies teacher as she became more involved in workers' rights efforts. She did, however, graduate with a degree in political science from UC Davis.

Shelleda is a founding member of the national Coalition of Labor Union Women, a former vice president of the California Labor Federation, and a former president of the Contra Costa Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO. She serves on the boards of the Labor Project for Working Families and the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education.

## Viewpoints

Humanities Network recently asked three scholars — RUBÉN MARTINEZ, CHRIS ABANI and CAROL MUSKE-DUKES — to tell us what they think the humanities has to offer in these challenging times. Here are their responses:



RUBÉN MARTINEZ is an award-winning journalist and author of "The Other Side: Notes from the New L.A., Mexico City, and Beyond," a collection of his essays and journal entries, and "Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail," an engrossing examination of Mexican migration as viewed through the lens of the Chávez family of Michoacan, Mexico.

Martinez currently holds the Fletcher Jones Chair in Literature and Writing at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

"The humanities are the incubator of critical thinking, and it is in a crisis that those skills are most needed (and often sorely lacking). The cause of the humanities is often misunderstood as custody of the past — making sure "tradition" is passed on, saving old books and films. Just the opposite is true: the task of the humanities is to imagine the future by critically examining the past. There is never a pragmatic argument against it, only an ideological one. An attack on the humanities is an attack on criticism itself and on the political energy it generates.

"The economic crisis of the new century is often compared with the Great Depression, and there are brilliant examples of how the humanities played a fundamental role in that earlier crisis, when artists and thinkers focused their talents on reflecting everyday life in extraordinary times. The works that resulted — everything from Dorothea Lange's photographs to John Steinbeck's novels to Woody Guthrie's songs — had a huge impact in their time and beyond it. Through the humanities, we discover the fullness of the experience of a people in a particular time and place, in their bodies and in their souls.



Council Board Member CHRIS ABANI is an associate professor of creative writing at UC Riverside and an award-winning novelist and poet. He recently received a PEN Beyond the Margins Award for his newest work, the novella "Song for Night."

"Everything we think originates in the humanities field (and social sciences are part of that). Every

phrase we know — free market, economics, history, democracy — comes from a small segment of society whose work is to think about all the nonscientific ways of being human, of expanding those definitions. Everything we feel about being American is actually a product of the humanities. It is telling that whenever an old culture is excavated, what we know about that lost civilization and its bearing on us comes from the humanities studies of that culture. There is no history, no ethics, no law, no philosophy, no religion, no future, no context for anything without the field of humanities. I mean to put it bluntly: without the humanities, there is no language, period. So we don't just offer solace, we are the solace."



California Poet Laureate CAROL MUSKE-DUKES is a professor of English at the University of Southern California. She has written seven books of poetry, four novels and two essay collections. Her most recent poetry volume, "Sparrow," was a National Book Award finalist.

"I think in these precarious times we have to draw on our individual resources as humanists. In my case I have to ask myself what I can do to help as an artist, a writer and a poet. I'm in a lucky position as poet laureate of California because I have a platform from which to speak and act.

"As poet laureate, I have been charged with creating a statewide project, and what I've decided to do is rev up a magic school bus, which will zip around the state bringing artists, writers, actors and even scientists to our struggling public schools to enrich the curriculum, to provide a "model" of creative teaching.

"I'm going to fund-raise: we need a vehicle and resources. I will call on writer and artist friends to participate. Radio celebrity and writer Sandra Tsing Loh, who's an advocate for public schools, is going to be involved. We'll not only give special readings, but also leave in place a manual that creative arts teachers can use in their classrooms, so that the experience the kids have with us can continue.

"We'd also like to partner schools with each other — for example, connect a school out in the Imperial Valley with a school in downtown L.A., or in Beverley Hills or Hancock Park. Kids could exchange poetry with each other or simply write letters. They'd be in touch with each other, sharing thoughts about their lives and experiences."





# Teens learn to look with new eyes at their communities

## Teens' work to be featured on Council website in April

One photographed a cluster of street signs to show how confusing they were, another took a picture of a discarded takeout sushi meal to reveal how neatly someone had placed its remains in a trash can, and a third clicked a shot of sandbags piled in front of a drainage pipe because she wondered why the bags were there and where the pipe led to.

This past summer and fall, some 300 young people in 21 California communities, as part of the Council's program California Stories: How I See It: My Place, explored their neighborhoods for interesting bits and pieces of their surrounding landscapes usually overlooked or taken for granted — and then captured what they discovered in

photographs and writing. By turns beautiful, funny, insightful and whimsical, the teens' photographs, along with their thoughts about their work, were exhibited in their individual communities this past fall and will be featured in a special exhibit on the Council's website in April.

Council Senior Programs Manager Felicia Kelley said that the program, partly based on the ideas of a Harvard historian, was developed as a way for young people to connect with their communities. "We wanted the kids to spend time observing, reflecting on, asking questions and thinking critically about the world they live in," she said. Kelley, who coordinated the program for the Council, said the concept that the built environment is not just a backdrop to people's lives, but an element of community and history that can be investigated, was new for many of the kids. "The project really opened their eyes, sparked their curiosity and got them thinking about their

communities in ways they hadn't before," she said.

Twenty-one California libraries received small grants, computer equipment, cameras and materials to conduct the program. The librarians at each site recruited participants, led photography field trips, held critique sessions, and helped the kids plan, curate and mount their exhibits. To engage the local community, many of the librarians brought in local professional photographs to teach the kids the elements of good picture taking and local historians to expand their knowledge of their communities' history.

The exhibits, enthusiastically received by the public, were significant confidence boosters for the teens, many of whom spoke about their work before live audiences at opening events. Teen librarian Alicia Doktor, who managed the project at the Riverside Public Library, said the teens' images gave exhibit visitors a

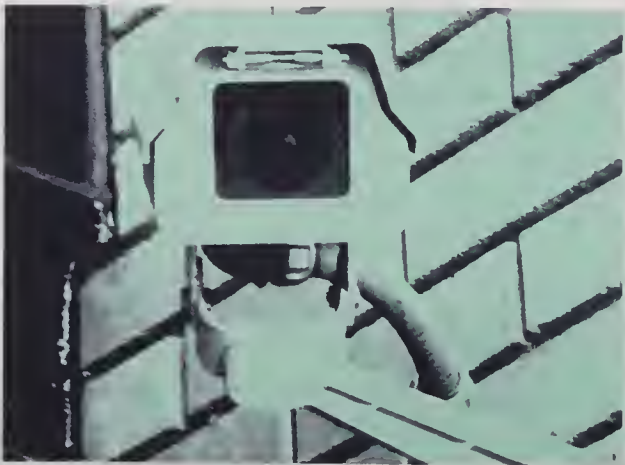
different view of Riverside. "The beauty the group captured in their photos was in many cases the opposite of what adults see each day as they live or work downtown. The teen's work was optimistic and communicated that feeling. It's how they see the world here."

*California Stories: How I See It: My Place is supported in part by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services, under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, administered in California by the State Librarian. The project was conducted in partnership with Califa, a membership-based service bureau designed to provide cost-effective delivery of services, programs and products through a membership network of California libraries.*



Photography lets me express my thoughts by seeing things from a different point of view. Through this project I've learned that when you change the way you look at things you see things you didn't see before.

Hannah Bartlebaugh, age 14, Antioch



Wherever you go, they are watching you.

"The Eye."  
Ernest Theo Cabreza, grade 8, San Leandro

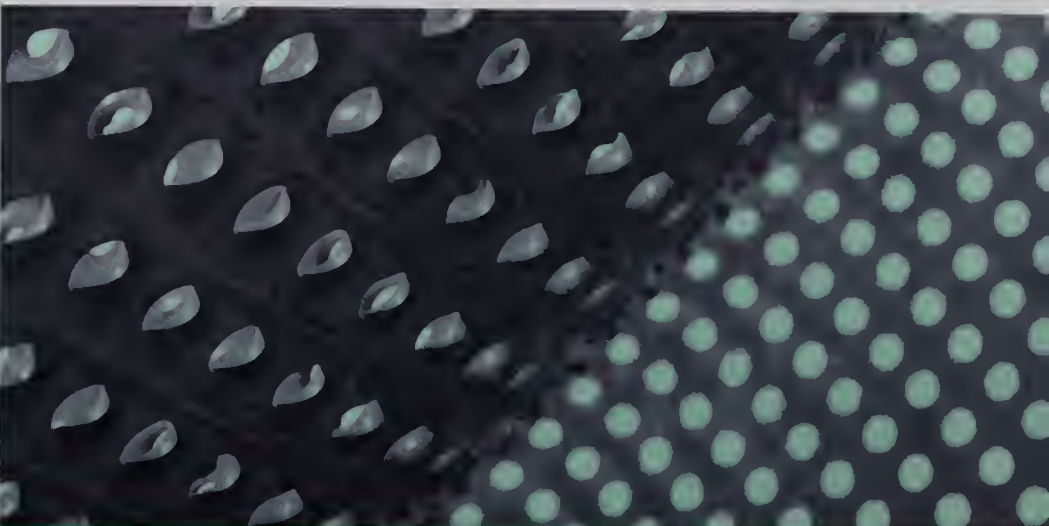


A beautiful flower grew next to the sidewalk. I almost stepped on it before I took the picture. I wanted to show how many plants grow everywhere we look. There is still beauty in nature even in places that have sidewalks and buildings.

Chinanell Jones, grade 8, Woodcrest

Weird circles in a crazy pattern — could it be the sky that someone has poked holes through? Actually it's the bottom of a nearby park bench with the sun casting over it making a shadow.

Nikki Snook, age 13, Moorpark







Bradley, the first and only African-American mayor of Los Angeles, on election eve 1973. A new Council-supported film project, “Tom Bradley’s Impossible Dream,” will tell Bradley’s story. Photo courtesy of producer Lyn Goldfarb.

**Tom Bradley’s Impossible Dream**

Producer: Lyn Goldfarb and Alison Sotomayor  
\$60,000

“Tom Bradley’s Impossible Dream” is a feature-length documentary film about the first African-American mayor of a major U.S. city elected without a black majority. First elected in 1973, Bradley served as Los Angeles mayor for 20 years and oversaw the complex dynamics of race, politics and economics as L.A. transformed itself into one of the most diverse and important cities in the world.

**Squeezebox Stories**

Producer: Julie Caine  
\$40,000

“Squeezebox Stories” is a radio documentary exploring the cultural, social and musical history of the people’s instrument, the accordion. Listeners will be taken on a musical road trip up and down the state of California to hear from a diverse group of individuals who use the accordion in a variety of traditional and popular musical styles — German polka, Mexican norteño, Zydeco, Cajun, Irish folk music, Balkan dance music — as well as in modern hybridized and eclectic accordion-based musical traditions.

**Strand: A Natural History of Cinema**

Director: Christian Bruno  
Producer: Natalija Vekic  
\$40,000

What does it mean to go to the movies and how has the movie-going experience changed over the years? The feature-length film “Strand: A Natural History Of Cinema” examines these questions by focusing on the rise and decline of San Francisco’s postwar movie theater culture in the 1960s and ’70s against the backdrop of the changing face of public space in postwar urban America. Viewers hear from scholars, essayists and many important figures in the Bay Area film community about the social dimensions of movie going, the factors that led to the closure of independently owned single-screen movie theaters, and how the demise of public space affects individuals and communities.

**The Delano Manongs:**

**The Forgotten Heroes of the UFW**  
Producer: Marissa Aroy  
\$40,000

“The Delano Manongs: Forgotten Heroes of the UFW” documents a small group of Filipino farm labor leaders in Delano, Calif., who instigated the great Delano grape strike in 1965 and helped create the United Farm Workers Union. The grape strike catapulted César Chávez into the national spotlight, but the Filipino leaders received little recognition in the mass media. Using animation, archival footage, and interviews with key leaders, participants and historians, the film tells the gripping story of this forgotten part of labor history. Producer Marissa Aroy, a second-generation Filipino American who grew up in the Delano area, narrates.

**RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT GRANTS**

**Operation Popcorn**

Producer: David Grabias  
\$10,000

The documentary film “Operation Popcorn” tells the remarkable story of a young Hmong-American businessman in Fresno who got caught up in a Rambo-like plot to launch a coup in Laos to stop human rights violations — and who now faces federal terrorism charges and life in prison. As his trial unfolds, we discover how the Hmong community is redefining its identity and coming to terms with the realities of life in modern-day California.

**Redevelopment Blues:**

**The Legacy of West Oakland**  
Producer: Erin FitzGerald  
\$7,500

“Redevelopment Blues: The Legacy of West Oakland” tells the story of West Oakland’s 7th Street neighborhood, once a vibrant center of music, culture and activism, but now known for its culture of violence. The film celebrates the area’s history and examines its decline at the hands of top-down redevelopment forces that physically divided and displaced the community. Along the way, it posits the idea that actions of the past without regard for culture, community and family had a hand in creating the West Oakland of today.

**My Life Before Me**

Producer: Banker White  
\$7,500

“My Life Before Me” is a documentary film about the life of Afro-Cuban musician and Yorubà priest Carlos Lázaro Aldama Pérez. His story explores how African traditions survived slavery and how they are now thriving two centuries later in California and all over the world.

**At 18**

Producer: Goro Toshima  
\$7,500

“At 18” tells the story of three youths as they try to find a life for themselves after they age out of the California foster care system. The film follows the youths over a 12-month period and reveals their successes and failures during a crucial time of transition.

**Whitewashed Adobe:**

**The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past**  
Project Director: William Deverell  
Producer: Walter Dominguez  
\$7,500

“Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past” is a four-part, four-hour documentary series about the intertwined Mexican and Anglo-American ethnic history of Los Angeles. The series is based upon the book of the same title by Professor William Deverell, a historian and director of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West.

**Green Shall Overcome**

Producer: Megan Gelstein  
\$7,000

“Green Shall Overcome” examines the viability of the national movement for green-collar jobs as both a pathway out of poverty for young adults and a key weapon in the battle against climate change. The film focuses on Van Jones, an Oakland-based African-American

civil rights lawyer who helped make Oakland the first city in the nation to create a green job corps program.

**Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin**

Producer: Arwen Curry  
\$7,000

“Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin” is an hour-long documentary film exploring the life, roots and ideas of the celebrated feminist science fiction and fantasy writer Ursula K. Le Guin. The Bay Area-born and -raised Le Guin, now 79, exploded onto the literary scene of the late 1960s, elevating science fiction to new levels of political sophistication and artistry. Although she has repeatedly won the highest awards in her genre, her story has never before been told on film.

**A Hammer in Her Hand**

Project Director: Maria Brooks  
\$7,000

“A Hammer in Her Hand” is a 60-minute television documentary about the complex history of women in California’s construction trades. The film tells the stories of pioneer and current tradeswomen while examining such issues as race, gender, class and politics that continue to shape tradeswomen’s experiences.

**The History of the Universe As Told by Wonder Woman**

Producer: Kristy Guevara-Flanagan  
\$7,000

“The History of The Universe As Told by Wonder Woman” looks



The Fox Theater, San Francisco, in the early 1960s before it was demolished and replaced by an apartment building. The Council-supported film project “Strand: A Natural History of Cinema ” examines the rise and fall of movie theater culture in San Francisco in 1960s and ’70s. Photo courtesy of Christian Bruno



at the 67-year career of Wonder Woman and her transformation from comic book character to feminist icon. The film addresses the legacy and cultural influence of Wonder Woman in light of a modern California mainstream media industry that creates and perpetuates images of women.

**Now En Español**

Producer: Andrea Meller  
\$7,000

This 90-minute feature documentary chronicles the ups and downs of being a Latina actress in Hollywood by following five dynamic Latinas who dub into Spanish the popular television program “Desperate Housewives” while trying to break through as actors. Along the way, the film explores issues of language and identity and what it means to be Latina today.

**NEW MEDIA GRANTS**

**Cambodian Community History Archive Website**

Producer: Susan Needham  
\$20,000

The Cambodian Community History Archive Website will create a permanent, bilingual, interactive multimedia digital archive of the Cambodian Community in Long Beach. Photographs, historical documents, audio recordings and video clips will tell the story of the community — how it came to be the largest Cambodian community outside Southeast Asia; how Long Beach Cambodians have re-created Cambodian cultural practices in California; and how Cambodians have contributed to the economy, politics and redevelopment of Long Beach. This project is a collaborative effort of California State University, Dominguez Hills and Long Beach campuses; and the Historical Society of Long Beach.

**CaliforniaNIOT.org**

Executive Producer: Patrice O’Neill  
\$20,000

California Not In Our Town (CaliforniaNiot.org) will be a unique social networking site where Californians can learn about hate crimes in their communities and engage with others to take action against them. The site is an outgrowth of the national Not In Our Town movement that encourages community response to hate crimes. It will feature streaming video, interactive maps, user-created blogs, an advice center, networking capabilities and much more, all with the aim of giving people the tools they need to fight intolerance.

*The guidelines for the next round of funding for the California Documentary Project will be available on the Council’s website ([www.californiastories.org](http://www.californiastories.org)) in June 2009.*

# Filmmaker Interview: Abby Ginzberg



Just back from attending the presidential inauguration, Bay Area filmmaker Abby Ginzberg talked about her California Documentary Project-supported film “Cruz Reynoso: A Man for All Seasons” with the Council’s John Lightfoot, who manages the project’s grant program. The film is a biographical portrait of the former director of California Rural Legal Assistance, first Latino member of the California Supreme Court, 2000 recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and appointee to President Obama’s Justice and Civil Rights Agency Review. The one-hour film is currently in production.

**JL: WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING?**

AG: My path was a little non-traditional. I graduated from college in the early 1970s with a degree in history and without really thinking about alternative careers, I just went to law school and spent ten years as a practicing lawyer. Then I said I’ve had enough of this. I wanted to find an artistic way to tell stories and make a difference. That led me to making several documentary films for organizations that I wanted to help. So the intersection that comes together for me is that if there is a good story with an intriguing social justice element and an interesting human being and I can pull it all together to create a picture of a certain time in American history, then I’m likely to be drawn to it.

**JL: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO MAKE A FILM ABOUT FORMER CALIFORNIA SUPREME COURT JUSTICE CRUZ REYNOSO?**

AG: Over 25 years of making films I have found that if you have the right character you can use biography as a way of telling a larger story. I was drawn to Cruz Reynoso because nobody else had told the story of what happened in the mid-1980s when the right wing was dedicated to getting rid of the progressive California Supreme Court and replacing it with more conservative judges. Cruz Reynoso was one of the justices who was recalled simply because he happened to be on the ballot the same year as Chief Justice Rose Bird. I remember being really depressed when we lost the fight to save the court, and now more than 20 years down the road, I feel we have a way of looking at things we didn’t understand at the time. Moreover, I have known Justice Reynoso for many years and have admired and respected him and wanted to share his story with a larger audience.

**JL: WHAT INSPIRED YOU ABOUT CRUZ REYNOSO?**

AG: Throughout his entire life, he has been the right person at the right time with the right background. Here’s a guy who had grown up as part of a farm-worker family with eleven children, who had picked fruit in the fields, and who had managed by dint of hard work and his own intelligence to get ahead at a time when very few Mexican Americans were going to college, much less law school. He wasn’t trying to be a role model — he just wanted to make a difference for people like those he knew growing up.

**JL: WHAT IS YOUR GOAL WITH THE FILM?**

AG: One goal I have is to help young Mexican-American high school students learn something about one of the trailblazers in their own community because they may never have heard of him. They were not alive in 1982 when he was placed on the Supreme Court or in 1986 when he was recalled. What I’m really hoping is that this film will inspire them, because here’s this guy who came from very little but through hard work and just being smart was able to make a huge difference for himself and others. I don’t know how many young Latinos will go to college or law school because they

had the opportunity to meet Cruz Reynoso though this film, but I see myself as sort of a midwife in making that happen.

**JL: WHAT IS THE TIME INVESTMENT FOR A FILM PROJECT LIKE THIS?**

AG: A big project like this is pretty much full time. Because of the sweep of history that I’m dealing with, I have to do a very thorough archival search, so I’m spending a lot of time in the archives making sure that I have the best footage and the best pictures. I’d say I’m about two-thirds through the interviews, but because the political and social landscape is changing due to the election of Barack Obama, some of what I want to say with the film is changing as well. I’d like to make the connection between national service today and service back in the ’60s stronger and more important. If I can make the issues around the politicization of the judiciary more pointed, I think I should because gay marriage has now become the rallying cry for the right wing in California. We have a Supreme Court that essentially supported gay marriage, and it’s not clear that they won’t be subject to some sort of recall effort. So I’m hoping I’ll get my film done before anything happens to the California Supreme Court.

**JL: HOW WILL PEOPLE BE ABLE TO SEE THE FILM?**

AG: I am very committed to the idea of public and community screenings, whether at the local library, the public high school auditorium or the community center. The idea is to bring people together to have the common experience of watching the film, afterward to have a discussion of the issues raised in the film, and then to think strategically about issues in the community that the film touches on, such as the question of segregated or inadequate education, the issue of the right to vote, the issue of some recall election that has happened in their city or state, the rights of the rural poor today. I expect that I’ll be showing this film in places where the rural poor will be coming to see it. So the challenge initially is to provoke discussion and then at the next level to figure out how to turn that into social action. The way to get to the second stage is to enlist the right partners in bringing people together for the film screening. So if I’m going to Fresno I’m going to do some work to find out who in Fresno has access to an audience that should be brought together to see this. And find out about the issues in Fresno that this film could be a helpful forum in bringing to light.

**JL: WHAT ARE YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES IN MAKING FILMS?**

AG: From the point of view of the independent filmmaker, there are huge challenges in raising the funds and producing a film that often costs several hundred thousand dollars. There are organizations that will fund the production of films like this, such as California Council for the Humanities, but then the challenge is to find organizations to fund the distribution. When you are finishing the film you have to look for ways to fund distribution because it takes a good year to eighteen months to make sure that you’ve gone to every community where you can host a meaningful screening and that you’ve shown it everywhere it should be shown, and this is before television broadcast because you build your audience for television with those community screenings.

**JL: WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF THE DOCUMENTARY FIELD?**

AG: It’s a little too early to know how the economy will affect documentary filmmakers. Some of us are funded for the moment, but we have no idea where future funding will come from. I don’t think anyone is jumping ship and leaving the field. I think we are all trying to figure out how we can do what we do for less money, how to trim our costs so the money goes further. But despite all this, I think this is still a very good era for documentary films. I think the role of the documentary film is understood as an increasingly good asset by people who teach both at high school and college levels. And it’s increasingly understood as a dialogue opener among people who are on opposite sides of an issue.



# Polk Street oral history project (continued from page 1)

Historical Society, decided to find the answers to those questions. His project, “Polk Street: Lives in Transition,” draws on stories gathered from more than 60 people, including longtime residents, gay bar owners, proprietors of new businesses and homeless people, to explore the history of the area, to celebrate its past and to look squarely at its current challenges.

An exhibit based on Plaster’s work, with images by photographer Gabriela Hasbun, is now on display at the GLBT Historical Society through June 2009 and will move to a venue in the Polk Street area this summer. A local pubic radio station is planning to air edited versions of the stories sometime this spring, and public radio producer Jay Allison will feature the stories on his Peabody award-winning transom.org and work with Plaster on an hour-long radio feature. Plaster is also writing a historical narrative about the area as a fellow with the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the City University of New York.

## FORCES BEHIND THE CHANGES

The story of Polk Street is complex, with many of its changes mirroring those taking place in other urban area across the country as competition for space squeezes

low-income people and businesses out of marginal neighborhoods and wealthier people and upscale businesses move in to replace them. In the ‘60s and ‘70s, Polk Street was a thriving middle-class gay area with its own gay bars, gay men’s stores, gay restaurants and gay sex shops. Then as rents started to rise and the Castro took over as the city’s premier gay mecca, Polk began to suffer economically and by the mid ‘80s, its backbone of gay businesses had largely evaporated. Around the same time, the area began attracting people who had once congregated in the adjacent Tenderloin neighborhood, including runaway gay and homeless youths, Asian and Latin-American immigrants, and, increasingly in the ‘90s, low-income seniors and transgendered women. Underground sex work and a drug economy became the most visible hallmarks of the area, but gay bars still served as places where people on the margins could find community.

In early 2000 when Plaster first arrived in the city, the area was changing once again. Upscale, heterosexual and metrosexual drinking establishments had started to replace the area’s hardscrabble gay bars, and new buildings dotted the neighborhood advertising

one-bedroom condominiums for upward of \$600,000. Tensions ran high as gay activist groups and newspapers accused new business owners of homophobia and “gentrification.”

Plaster found that people had strong reactions to what was taking place. “A lot of people I interviewed had harrowing stories of being abused at home and suffering from discrimination of some kind and they had come to San Francisco because of its reputation as a safe haven and a gay mecca. They ended up in the lower-income Polk area because of discrimination against them in other parts of the city, including the more affluent Castro neighborhood. It was where policing was less severe and where they could often find housing in the area’s residential hotels. It was also where runaway queer youths could find under-the-table work, sweeping sidewalks or washing windows in the gay-owned businesses, and not run the risk of being picked up by the police and being shipped back home to an abusive family. Of course, many youths did sex work to survive.”

Plaster continued, “Everyone talked about it being a tight-knit community where people took care of each other. Some like Coy

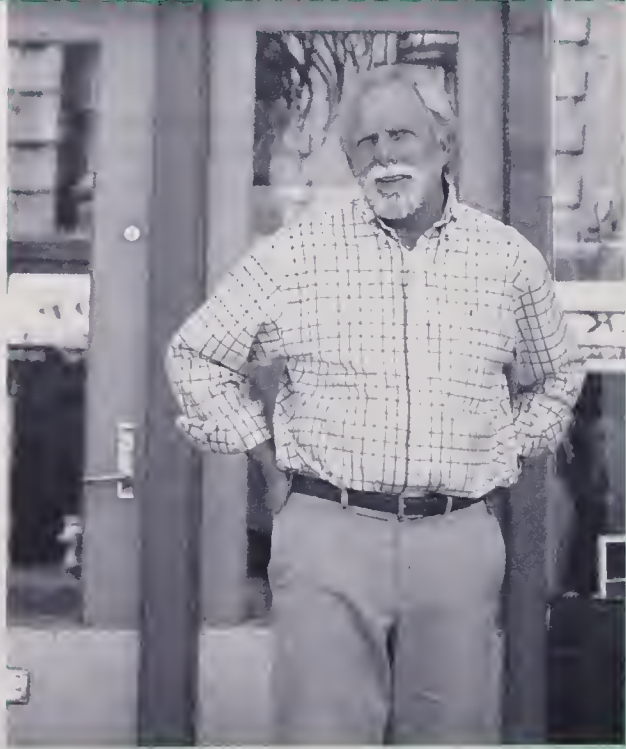
Ellison referred to it as the first family they ever had. A lot of those things began to change as housing costs started to rise across the city and gay bars closed.

Ellison, who came to Polk Street in the late ‘70s, feels a big sense of loss at what has happened to Polk Street. “The more gentrification that’s going on it seems like it’s gotten a little more aggressive, its not as gay friendly ... [and] the opportunities are going away for people who are coming to the city trying to find themselves. ... it seems like people are forgetting the history of what was here.

Another of Plaster’s interviewees is 42-year-old Alexis Miranda, who moved to San Francisco from Florida in the mid-‘80s to be where people would accept her for who she was. Miranda, who now manages a transgender bar in the area and works as an entertainer, remembers a time when people on Polk Street held fund-raising parties for each other when times were tough. Miranda misses those days and worries about the changes taking place. “I’m not against the changes as long as they don’t exclude people,” she said. “But some people want to change things by getting rid of the transgender people and the low-income people. They say, ‘We want them

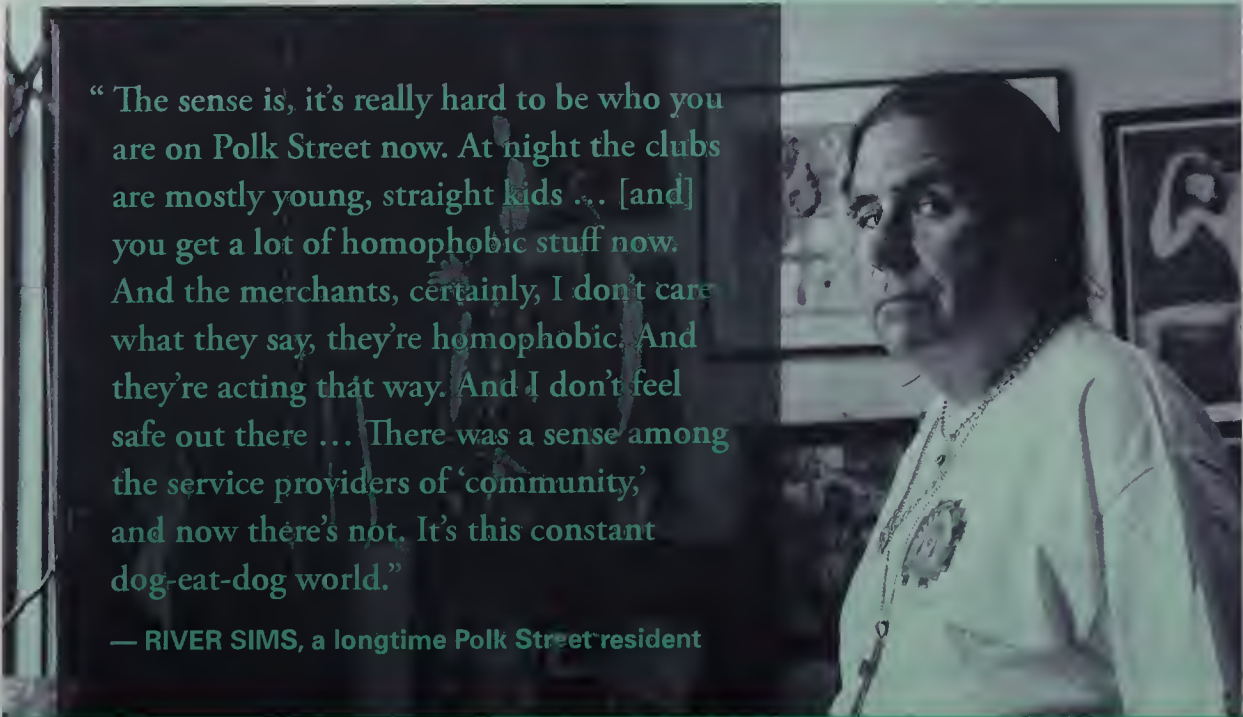
## POLK STREET: A COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION

Photographs by Gabriela Hasbun



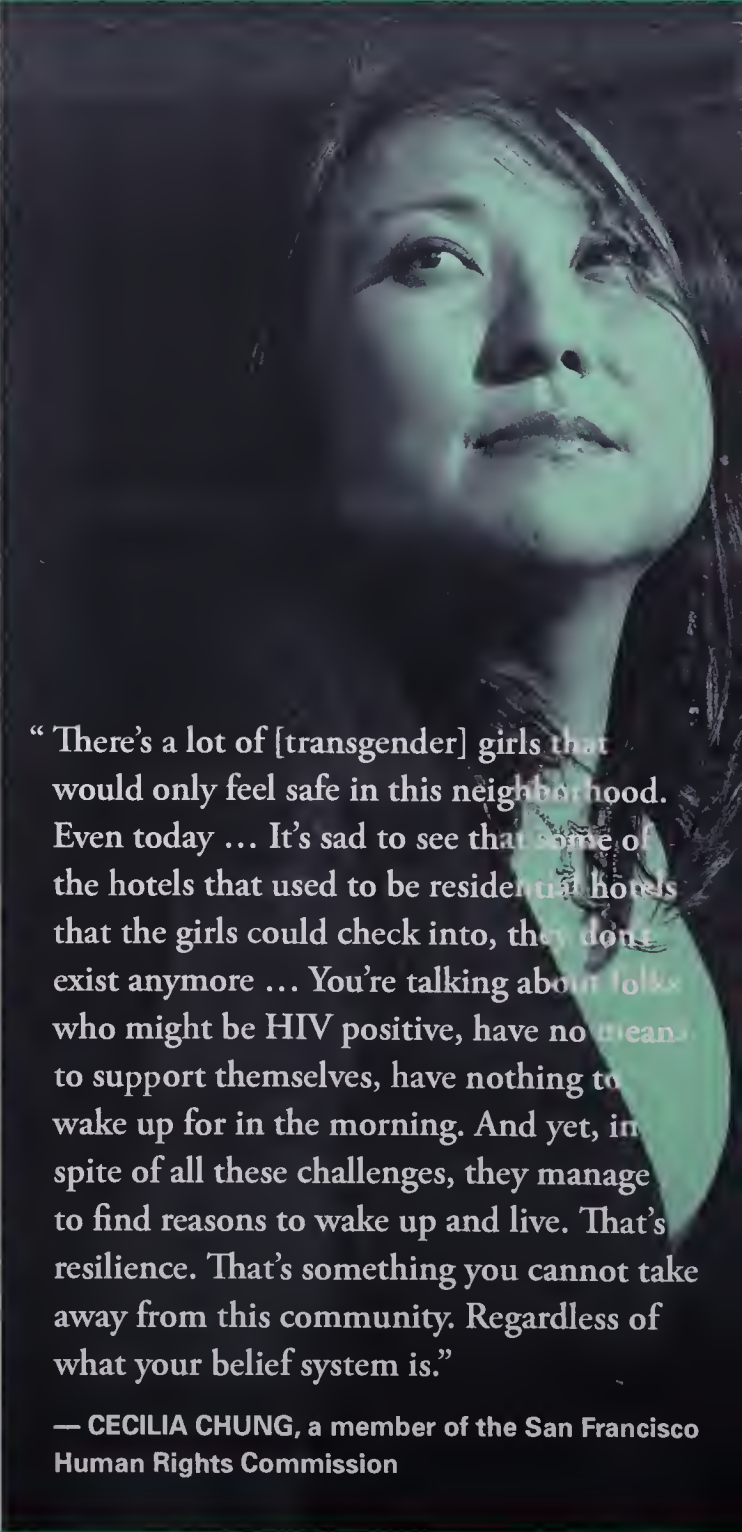
“I think if some people do get pushed out ... it might be the downside of it, of trying to clean up the neighborhood ... If that’s the outcome of people taking over and trying to fix their stores up or fix the bars up to make them more acceptable for more people, I think that’s unfortunately going to be the side effect ... You have to make decisions [for] what is best for the neighborhood.”

— RON CASE, a business owner on Polk Street and a 10-year resident of the area



“The sense is, it’s really hard to be who you are on Polk Street now. At night the clubs are mostly young, straight kids ... [and] you get a lot of homophobic stuff now. And the merchants, certainly, I don’t care what they say, they’re homophobic. And they’re acting that way. And I don’t feel safe out there ... There was a sense among the service providers of ‘community,’ and now there’s not. It’s this constant dog-eat-dog world.”

— RIVER SIMS, a longtime Polk Street resident



“There’s a lot of [transgender] girls that would only feel safe in this neighborhood. Even today ... It’s sad to see that some of the hotels that used to be residential hotels that the girls could check into, they don’t exist anymore ... You’re talking about folks who might be HIV positive, have no means to support themselves, have nothing to wake up for in the morning. And yet, in spite of all these challenges, they manage to find reasons to wake up and live. That’s resilience. That’s something you cannot take away from this community. Regardless of what your belief system is.”

— CECILIA CHUNG, a member of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission



to live in our neighborhood, but only as long as they act appropriately.' And, I say, 'Appropriate by whose standards?' We're part of city life, and you're not going to change city life. I think the new people in the neighborhood are learning that."

Architect Ron Case is one of the business owners Plaster interviewed. Case lives and works on Polk Street in a building he and his wife bought 10 years ago. Through a neighborhood association he founded, Case tries to keep a watch on crime and help improve the area by planting trees and cleaning up the trash that accumulates on the sidewalks. "We've been accused of trying to gentrify the neighborhood when we just want to make it more beautiful," Case says. "And some people distrust my motives when they hear I want to get rid of the people who sleep on the street or shoot up drugs in the alleyways. I guess they're right because I would like to see the homeless taken care of humanely and get help, and I don't think chronic substance its OK."

As Plaster talked to people, he began to get a better sense of the combination of factors that created the Polk Street of today. "Many people felt that the cultural changes on Polk Street represented a

hostile takeover by the straight community, but I found that it didn't happen that way. Many of the gay bars were owned by older gay men, and along with the rest of the Polk population, they aged and wanted to retire. That coupled with the increasing bar rents after the dot.com era, the ascendancy of the Internet as a way for gay people to meet each other and the migration of queer sex work to the Internet changed the area.

"I think what it comes down to is a conflict between two economies on the street, one of them based around queer bars and to a certain extent sex work that intersected with the bars, and this emerging block of businesses that were taking over where that former economy had been faltering."

"It's also a classic cultural clash. People who escaped discrimination in other parts of the country and found a home in the Polk value personal freedom and acceptance of people in the margins, even at the risk of some of the homelessness and drug use you see in the area. Newer business owners are really stressing the need for order and structure, even at the risk of ejecting some of the people and businesses that were once synonymous with Polk Street's character."

On Polk Street today, single-room-occupancy hotels exist beside upscale apartment buildings, and trendy restaurants and bars sit on the same block as run-down liquor stores. It's a place where new and old continually collide, where tensions can run high.

## MOVING FORWARD

As part of his project, Plaster — with help from Martin Meeker, a humanities adviser on the project and an academic specialist at the Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley — has been holding neighborhood meetings to bring people together to talk about problems and find common ground for moving forward. "At the first meeting, a question was raised about a liquor store where drug dealing took place," Plaster said. "One merchant thought we should work to get rid of the store, but several people had a different perspective. They wondered how a closure would affect the formerly homeless in nearby single-room-occupancy hotels who frequented the store to buy canned goods they could later heat up on hot plates. It was something that the first speaker hadn't thought about."

Plaster isn't sure how productive these meetings are, but he's

happy that people with different viewpoints are getting together. "They're talking about how they perceive the neighborhood differently — how they perceive urban space differently — and that could be a positive thing.

"People feel a lot of nostalgia about Polk Street. It's where the first gay pride parade was held, it's where Halloween happened before Castro Street, it's where the first gay business association in the country was formed, it's where a 1965 police raid of a gay ball shifted the gay civil rights movement onto the agenda of San Francisco's progressive political establishment.

"I think that the exhibit has been very exciting for the queer Polk community because historians have completely overlooked Polk Street's history, and every time it's mentioned in the media, the story is about Polk Street's visible sex work population. I haven't seen representations of the tight-knit family there or seen articles about all the fund-raising organizations people formed to take care of each other. People who couldn't find a home anywhere else were able to find one in the Polk and build a family and change the politics of the city. That's remarkable, and it's important that we remember it."



Reverend Megan Rohrer at the Welcome Ministry in San Francisco's Polk Street area. Reverend Rohrer participated in the Council-supported oral history project about the city's Polk Street neighborhood.

## WELCOME MINISTRY'S REVEREND ROHRER SEES BENEFIT IN POLK STREET PROJECT

The Reverend Megan Rohrer directs the Welcome Ministry, a consortium of 12 churches in San Francisco providing services to the homeless. She carries out her work from the Old First Presbyterian Church in the Polk Street area. Reverend Rohrer recorded her story as part of Plaster's project "Polk Street: Lives in Transition," introduced Plaster to homeless people to interview and participated in mediated neighborhood meetings connected with the project. Humanities Network talked with Reverend Rohrer about the neighborhood, her work and her experience with the project.

### HN: HOW DO YOU THINK PEOPLE SEE POLK STREET?

MR: I think people see the duality of Polk Street. On the one hand

you can find trendy restaurants, bars for twentysomethings, and touristy places, and then you have people sleeping on the sidewalk, sex workers and people at the bottom of the economic ladder. What people don't see is that it's like a small town. They don't notice when local businesspeople help out the homeless or the days when the homeless people sweep the sidewalks in front of businesses. They miss the connections in between. I think that's what Joey's project does well. It shows those connections.

What's important is that those connections really create a community, one that's kind of amazing because the people have so little in common. In a way when you look at Polk Street, I think you can see the history of all of San Francisco.

Polk Street has people who are interested in money above all, people who are obsessed with having their sexual needs met, people who feel disconnected from their families and can feel connected on Polk Street.

### HN: CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE MEDIATED NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN CONNECTION WITH THE PROJECT?

MR: Joey has had two professionally mediated neighborhood meetings where homeless people, businesspeople and nonprofit workers have come together and talked about problems in the neighborhood. Everyone has mentioned things like crime and prostitution, the homeless have talked about the lack of bathrooms in the area, and the businesspeople have complained about the homeless people relieving themselves on the street. What I've gotten from those meetings is a feeling that we are all coming at these problems from a different perspective and that we need to work to solve them, that the businesspeople need to work on improving the economy and that the homeless people need to work on having a stable place to live. There hasn't been a drive to find a common solution to the problems, but more an honoring of the fact that people are all working on the same thing from different places and that is OK.

### HN: HOW HAS THE PROJECT AFFECTED YOUR WORK?

MR: The photo that Joey used on the postcard promoting the exhibit features two kids who use our services, Deeth and Ian. Those two kids feel very excited right now because of the photo and that someone would care enough to want to hear their story. It has changed their willingness to take care of themselves. Other guests at the Welcome Ministry who were also part of the project want to work on ways they can start telling their own stories, and we are going to start a project like that here. People are thinking now that they can record something and get it out there and that they don't have to keep it stuck in their own heads.

I feel the project connected me to things that I've been trying to figure for a long while. For example, we've been trying to get a public restroom in the area since 1988, and I had pretty much given up on that idea. But I feel that in watching Joey talk to all the people on Polk Street in an objective way, I got answers about how to move forward. It's not that he found solutions, but he opened up the possibility of change. Now we have some people interested in helping us find a storefront space for a bathroom and shower. I wouldn't have asked people to help work on this if it hadn't been for this project.



# Who We Are

The mission of the California Council for the Humanities is to foster understanding between people and encourage their engagement in community life through the public use of the humanities.

The Council is an independent, not-for-profit state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities supported through a public-private partnership that includes funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities, private foundations and corporations. The Council also receives essential support from individuals.

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## INSIDE

A formerly thriving gay neighborhood in San Francisco undergoes wrenching change

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